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# Factors Influencing the Acceptance or Rejection of an Overweight Peer

Audrey James

*Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne*

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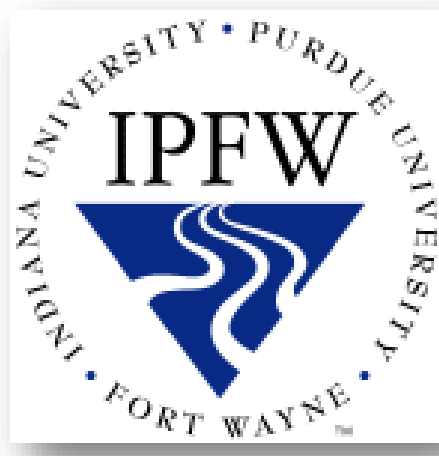
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# Factors Influencing the Acceptance or Rejection of an Overweight Peer

Audrey James, Department of Psychology

(Faculty Sponsor: Jay W. Jackson)

## Introduction

The number of obese adults and children in the U.S. has risen dramatically over past decades (CDC, 2011). As a result, there has been increased attention given to how overweight people are perceived and treated. Studies have shown that overweight people are generally evaluated harshly; are stereotyped as being lazy, unintelligent, and dirty; and are discriminated against in many walks of life (Pulh & Heuer, 2009).

Much work has been devoted to understanding the determinants of weight bias. Some approaches have focused on individual differences in beliefs (e.g., belief in a just world, perceived controllability of weight), while others have focused on social forces (e.g., role of mass media).

The main purpose of this study was to examine how people would react to an overweight peer (vs. a normal weight peer) whose weight was attributed to lifestyle choices (e.g., poor eating and exercise habits) or to choices outside their control (e.g., medical condition).

Our predictions were guided by a theoretical model that considers both individual differences and social situational forces. Specifically, our model suggests that the personality traits of openness and agreeableness influence the extent to which individuals have positive contact experiences with outgroup members, and these contact experiences, in turn, influence intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) .

This model has been successfully applied in studies of general prejudices based on ethnicity and nationality, but has not been used to examine weight bias or how people react to individual members of a stigmatized group.

## Method

- Participants (N = 192 PSY 120 students ) first completed **the Big 5 Aspects Scale** (DeYoung, et al., 2007) using a 5-point response format, ranging from (1) *very inaccurate of me* to (5) *very accurate of me*. Agreeableness (e.g. *I feel others’ emotions; I hate to seem pushy*) and Openness (e.g., *I love to reflect on things; I think quickly*) were each assessed with 20 items. The items were averaged so that scores could range from 1-5 for each sale.
- Participants then exchanged essays with a same-sex “online interaction partner” to discuss the “freshmen fifteen.” The essay was **manipulated** so that the partner was portrayed as being normal weight or overweight, either due to lifestyle choices, to forces beyond control, or no attribution (control). Hence this was a 2 x 3 factorial design.
- Next, participants completed a 13 item **partner acceptance scale**. Responses were made on 5-point scales ranging from (1) not at all to (5) extremely to such items as, *Do you feel positive towards your partner? To what extent are you looking forward to your online chat with this person? To what extent would you like to have a different interaction partner?* (reverse scored). The items were averaged; scores could range from 1-5.
- Participants completed a set of other measures, including a 20-item scale to assess **past contact experiences with overweight individuals** (e.g., *pleasant, constructive, frequent, negative* (r), *voluntary, competitive* (r), *intimate, friendly*). Responses were made on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree). They also completed a scale to measure **empathic perspective taking** (e.g., *I can see things from the other person’s point of view*).
- Lastly, the participants were debriefed and excused.

## Results

An ANOVA found that our participants were more accepting of a normal weight peer (M = 3.06) than an overweight peer (M = 2.77),  $F(1, 188) = 4.56, p = .034$ . There was also a main effect for gender. Females were overall more accepting of their partner than their male counterparts (M = 3.09 vs M = 2.78),  $F(1, 188) = 6.59, p = .011$ .

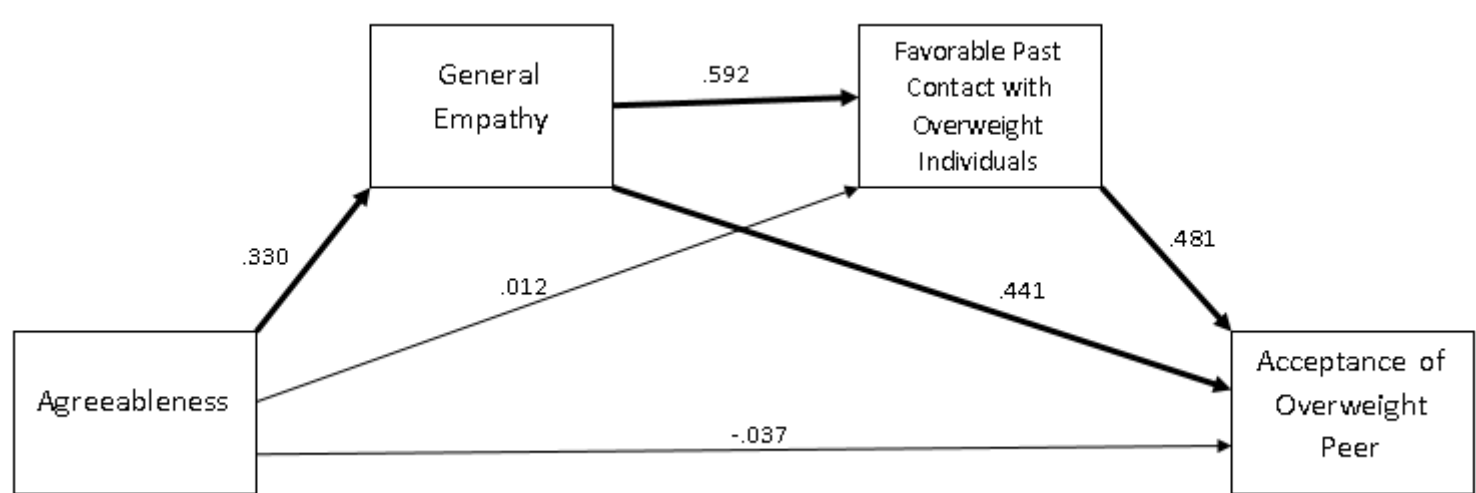
We next conducted an analysis of conditional effects (Hayes, 2013) . The results determined that the effect of agreeableness on acceptance was significantly moderated by the manipulated variables (peer’s weight and control over the weight),  $B = -.536 (SE = .240, p = .026)$ .

As shown in Table 1, The results suggest that Agreeableness is a good predictor accepting a normal weight peer (regardless of control), as well as an overweight peer IF his or her weight was due to outside forces (e.g., a medical condition). However, agreeableness does not predict acceptance of an overweight peer if their weight was obviously under their control or control was not specified.

**Table 1. Conditional Effect of Agreeableness on Acceptance of Partner at Values of the Moderators**

Partner’s Wt.	Attribution	Effect	Standard Error	p
Normal Weight	Low Control	.938	.211	<.001
Normal Weight	Neutral	.679	.178	<.001
Normal Weight	High Control	.420	.217	.055
Overweight	Low Control	.403	.191	.036
Overweight	Neutral	.143	.157	.362
Overweight	High Control	-.116	.204	.571

We next conducted a serial multiple mediation analysis to examine possible pathways to accepting the overweight peer. Openness had no significant relationship with acceptance of an overweight peer (in correlational or regression analyses). However, Agreeableness was strongly related to empathy, contact experiences, and acceptance of the overweight peer. When these variables were entered into a serial multiple mediation analysis, The indirect path of Agreeableness → Empathy → Contact → Acceptance was significant, Effect = .094 (SE = .036), LCI to UCI = .034 to .182. This is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Results of serial multiple mediation analysis. Bold arrows indicate significant paths.**

## Discussion

The number of people adversely affected by the stigma of obesity has steadily increased over the past few decades. Hence, this is an issue of considerable importance and magnitude. Our findings suggest that acceptance of overweight peers is shaped, in part, by their past contact experiences and feelings of empathy. This is consistent with research on ethnic prejudice. Our findings further suggest that Agreeableness may be an important determinant of favorable contact experiences and high levels of empathy. Additional research is needed to further our understanding of the specific factors underlying the dynamics of weight bias.